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ABSTRACT

American schools, after two decades of expansion, are now in the midst of an enrollment decline and inflation. The impact of the shift from growth to retrenchment and streamlining has been severe. An effective approach to this situation requires an understanding of the new conditions and of available alternatives for action. An overview of the changes in the educational system demands a thoroughgoing investigation of the situations that exist at the national, state, and community levels. The present study treats both national and local aspects of the situation. Data concerning the demographic dimensions of enrollment decline are examined. This is followed by a treatment of the impact of decreased enrollment on various aspects of public education including students, community members, school personnel and the physical and economic dimensions. Since the pattern of declining enrollment in many cases points to reallocation of space and closing of structures, the response to decline must come to grips with the human aspects of this process. One system in which reorganization has met with notable success is the East Syracuse-Minoa district of upstate New York. The planning that preceded the reorganization and the process itself are explained in detail. (Author/MLF)

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Declining Enrollments

National Problem - Local Response

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Declining Enrollments:

National Problem - Local Response

The nineteen seventies have become a time of trial for American public education. Having been forced to expand and diversify by the pressures of the past two decades, schools are now confronted with demands of a very different sort. Declining enrollments, economic factors, and other constraints dictate that education must streamline rather than enlarge, and retrench rather than elaborate. Coming on the heels of the widest growth experienced by any educational system, the impact of these latest strictures has been particularly severe.

An effective approach to this situation requires an understanding of the new conditions and of available alternatives for action. An overview of the changes in the educational system demands a thoroughgoing investigation of the situations which exist at the national, state, and community levels. Because public education is still largely a local concern, it also necessitates that decision-making take place within school districts.

The present study treats both national and local aspects of the situation. A full range of data concerning the dimensions of enrollment declines is initially examined. This is followed by a treatment of the impact of lower enrollments on various aspects of public education. The survey culminates in an analysis of one district's efforts to deal with these

conditions. What emerges is a multi-dimensional portrait of the adaptability of public education in the seventies.

Background

A survey of the factors which contributed to the development of the present circumstances in the public schools must compare conditions in the 1970's with those in earlier decades. This does not imply that a catastrophic break occurred with the passing of the year 1969. Indeed, many of the changed educational circumstances were already becoming apparent by the close of the sixties. It is assumed throughout this investigation, however, that the totality of these factors has produced a fundamental change in the circumstances which underlie the development of the public schools.

Between 1900 and 1970, this history of American education was marked by almost continual increases in student enrollments, financial support, and public confidence. Even the Great Depression did not appreciably slow this trend. A society bent on expansion and achievement almost universally came to believe that education was the pathway to fulfillment. The last years of this period saw the most marked development of this pattern. Spurred by competition from Soviet technology and the social concerns of the federal courts, the nation dumped untold sums into widening the scope and accessibility of its educational system. The sixties were a time of unparalleled prosperity for the schools. As America reached out and touched the moon, her

educational system achieved some of its most notable successes.

Yet somehow, within a comparatively short period, that longest summer of the schools abruptly ended. The symptoms are now all too familiar. They surround us. Where college degrees were once worshipped, disenchantment with the value of higher education now occurs. Where school districts once were compelled to bid for the services of qualified teachers, an oversupply of such personnel now exists. While few school budgets were once rejected by voters, over a third are now turned down each year. The public schools have fallen upon hard times, and the reality of this situation now must be fully recognized and attacked.

Conditions demand thoughtful analysis rather than rash action. Only through a reasoned approach can symptoms be separated from causes and the true roots of the problem be identified.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

One of the most salient aspects of the growth of education during the pre-1970 period was a widespread increase in enrollment. Between 1950 and 1970 alone, elementary school populations nationwide grew from 22 to 37 million. During the same period, secondary school enrollment more than doubled, rising from 6.5 million to nearly 15 million. This development represented the culmination of a growth in school populations which marked much of American history. As the children of the post

World War II 'baby boom' reached elementary, and secondary school, and eventually college, enrollments in each of those areas shot upward dramatically.[1]

However, this demographic boom was soon to be followed by a demographic bust. In 1970, total enrollments in the nation's elementary schools began to decline. Successive years of this downward pattern made it apparent that the decline would not be of brief duration.

Between 1974 and the present time, the pace of the downturn in enrollments has apparently stabilized, yet disagreement exists concerning the future of school enrollment levels.[2] Data from the National Center for Health Statistics shows that 3,126,000 children were born during fiscal (and educational) year 1975, up from the 3,112,000 births in fiscal year 1973.[3] Figures such as these indicate a new upswing in births, yet this trend is hardly well-established. Worsening economic conditions might adversely influence any recovery in the birth rate.

Long range projections show that a recovery in the birth rate will eventually occur, yet slowness of this development will not reverse declines in educational enrollments for some time. Most estimates indicate that marked declines should abate by 1980. Small increases in elementary populations are forecast for the period between 1980 and 1985. Even at this rate, however, enrollments in grades K-8 are not expected to reach 1974 levels until the year 1990.[4]

Such is the aggregate dimension of changes in public school enrollments. All of this assumes, of course, that present demographic projections are accurate. It should be remembered that demography has still not yet come into its own. In 1960, for instance, elementary school enrollments in 1980 were forecast to be between 37,405,000 and 46,079,000 students. Current estimates put that number at 29,796,000,[5] an overestimation of 25%. Thus, although another dramatic drop in enrollments does not seem in the offing, it should not come as a surprise if all of those empty desks are not filled during the coming decade.

Additional statistics detail a number of aspects of the declines in public school enrollment.

As one might suspect, the pattern neither has, nor will have a uniform effect throughout the nation. Enrollments actually increased in 12 states between 1970 and 1975. Ten of these increases equaled or exceeded 1% of total enrollments. Most of these states were concentrated in New England and the West. Largest gains were registered by Arizona (9.8%), Florida (8.1%), Alaska, and Nevada (each 7.5%).[6]

Most states showed declines in school enrollments, however. Numbers of school children fell in areas throughout the East, Midwest, South, and West. Declines were especially prominent in the Midwest, where Iowa and North Dakota led the nation with drops exceeding 10% of total enrollment.[7]

The geographic dimensions of public school enrollment

declines are considerable. While twelve states experienced increases, thirty seven showed declines. In actual magnitudes of enrollment changes only one increase, Florida's, exceeded 50,000 students. At the same time, declines of more than 50,000 were registered in nine states, the largest being California (239,000), New York (112,000), Pennsylvania (97,000), and Illinois (79,000).[8]

This data indicates that enrollment drops are not a phenomenon confined to northern states or colder climates. Indeed, four of the twelve increases occurred in New England! The declines are occurring throughout the nation, and are affecting most of the largest state school systems.

Paralleling the changes in school enrollments among the states were alterations caused by the movement of populations between urban and rural areas. Between 1970 and 1975, the number of persons moving from metropolitan regions exceeded the number moving to such areas. While some of this pattern represented continued development of peripheral suburbs, a sizable proportion resulted from growth of towns with populations of less than 25,000,and rural areas.[9] One demographer noted that,"many people (are) implementing a preference for a rural or small town residence over that of a city..".[10]

Migratory patterns such as these had a particular impact on city school systems. During the 1970-75 period, cities experienced a net out-migration of 1.8 million for children aged 5-14 years, and .5 million for those aged 15-19.[11]

So great was the magnitude of this decline that, by 1975-76, public school enrollments in the nation's 27 Great City school districts had reverted to their 1962-63 levels.[12]

Variations in the age and sex structure of school populations have also accompanied declines in enrollments. Developments in the proportions of children at each age level has an important impact on grade level distributions. Because children first attend grades K-8, then move into high school, changes in the birth rate have a predictable ripple effect, touching the elementary, then the secondary areas. During the late 1960's and early 1970's, as elementary enrollments showed progressively larger declines, high school enrollments were still increasing. The secondary totals were expected to reach a long term high during 1976. After this, they should experience a long period of decline. While an upturn in elementary enrollments may begin during the early 1980's, high school totals cannot be expected to rise until the very last years of the twentieth century. After over a decade of decline, numbers of secondary students will probably not reach 1976 levels until around the year 2010.[13]

The trends in elementary and secondary school enrollment seem especially noteworthy from an historical standpoint. They demonstrate that, unlike in the past, when grade levels simultaneously experienced the impact of rising enrollments, different segments of school systems may be required to cope with varying numbers of students. As elementary schools pre-

pare for their lowest student populations during the mid-1970's, high schools will be handling their highest enrollments ever. As elementary programs are influenced by an extended period of gradually rising populations, in the 1980's, secondary schools will be in a similarly extended time of enrollment decline.

The reasons behind the changes in public school enrollments need not be discussed in minute detail, yet some consideration of them contributes to a better understanding of the general situation.

Changes in school enrollments relate directly to changes in the makeup of the school-age population. Most populations are determined by the influence of three elements: migration, deaths, and births. The major aspects of migration which influence school enrollments have already been treated. Ordinarily, the death rate is not an important factor in the definition of school age populations. Education, especially at the elementary and secondary levels, is most directly touched by the birth rate.[14]

The total number of births in any given year depends on the number of women of childbearing age and their fertility. Given the current development of demographic research, the total number of women of childbearing age is relatively easy to predict. Fertility, or the number of births per thousand women of childbearing ages, is more difficult to ascertain. Factors reputed to influence fertility rates have included

employment, work roles, the career aspirations of women, use of contraceptives, abortion laws, divorce rates, postponement of marriage, and concern about the environment, overpopulation, and limited resources.[15]

Changes in employment seem to be directly related to fertility. Since, 1957, when fertility rates in the United States began to decline sharply, female participation in the labor force has rapidly increased. Accordingly, it seems that the future availability of jobs will significantly influence fertility. Current economic forecasts, which indicate that the work force will not continue to expand, also imply that additional declines in fertility should not be expected. [16]

Since most births occur within marriage, the postponement of marriage and a decline in fertility within marriage have also impácted the birth rate. In 1960, the percentage of single women aged 20 to 24 years was 28.4; by 1973, the figure had risen to 38.3.[17] Additionally, between 1960 and 1974 the percentage of childless women aged 15-19 who were ever married grew from 44 to 56. [18]

The directions of these and other factors have been analyzed in attempts to predict future fertility patterns. There seems to be some ground for belief that the rapid decline of fertility rates may be ending. Sklar and Berkow determined that the fertility rate in California actually rose by 2.3% between 1973 and 1974. Similar patterns have been charted in New York, Hawaii, Washington, and Oregon.[19] Increased fertility would certainly

lead to higher numbers of births. Yet, existing evidence is by no means conclusive.[20] The development of fertility rates during the next ten years may be actually measured before it can be accurately predicted.

Future directions of public school enrollment declines cannot be precisely projected. Yet, the reality of these declines in the present context is undeniable. Even more apparent and significant are the effects which these patterns have wrought.

THE IMPACT OF ENROLLMENT DECLINES

The influence of declines in numbers of students begins at the proverbial 'empty desk', and extends outward to the rest of the classroom and the community. Impacts of enrollment changes are both positive and negative. Their effects are felt by students, parents, teachers, and members of the general public.

Prime concerns of the effect of enrollment declines relate to the quality of education. Decreases in numbers of students have not always been detrimental to instructional programs. A case study of Minnesota school districts revealed that in areas where enrollment declined, cutbacks in offerings did not also occur.[21] Former New York State Commissioner of Education Ewald B. Nyquist pointed out that lower enrollments should stimulate creative efforts to improve education at the elementary and secondary levels. [22]

The Personal Dimension

While cursory consideration might support the idea that fewer students would give teachers greater opportunity to individualize instruction and devote greater attention to remaining pupils, closer examination of the situation reveals other complexities. It is true that there are, in the words of one educator, "opportunities for extra services and options that couldn't take place with the schools filled to the brim as before."[23] At the same time, however, extra resources to support this wealth of new programs do not always exist. The services of an art, music, physical education, or reading teacher may not be available unless there is a student population large enough to justify the employment of such an individual. Particularly in basic skills areas, such as reading, programmed methods of learning are not as effective as instruction by teachers. Yet the existence of excessively small classes fractionalizes the distribution of teacher time and reduces the numbers of students who receive such instruction.[24] A similar situation exists in the case of non-personnel resources. Textbooks, laboratory facilities, and other specialized materials cannot be purchased unless there are enough students to justify their use. As the sizes of classes decline, the outfitting of individual rooms with such resources becomes more and more questionable.

The personal impact of enrollment declines extends beyond the students actually served by public education to the

communities which makeup school systems. The emotional ramifications of lower enrollments are staggering. To a public which has been subjected to demands for more school facilities from such sources as Edward R. Morrow "We have become a 'have not' nation. We have not enough teachers. We have not (enough) classrooms."[25] and a Kiplinger report "And now for the sorry state of our schools...already jampacked... already inadequate".,[26] the revelation of decline is scarcely believable.

Schools form the foci of civic activity in many communities. Beside beside being centers for the instruction of youth, they become gathering points for public events and functions. When declines in enrollment necessitate consolidation of student populations and closing of school buildings, popular disbelief can often become popular frustration. Neighborhood residents often cast aside instructional and financial considerations to demand that schools which are closed should be in areas outside of their own.[27] It must be recognized that this frustration is an integral part of the impact of declining enrollments. As material concerns of communities, they form important aspects of any consideration of the situation.

Another important personal impact of declines in student populations occurs in the area of personnel. Although minor decreases in numbers of pupils can produce smaller classes; major declines, of the types currently being experienced, must lead to lower staff requirements. In some instances, normal

attrition through retirements and departures to assume other jobs allows excess positions to be phased out with minimal personal dislocation. Again, however, the magnitude of current enrollment drops does not always make the process such a painless one.[28]

The influence of collective bargaining has mixed with that of reduced enrollments to complicate the existing situation. Union demands have increasingly focused more on job security and less on dollars. Local school districts and state governments have been placed under increasing demands to reduce staffs strictly by seniority. The impact of these patterns is often doubly unfortunate. Termination of less senior personnel leaves gaps in instructional staffs which cannot often be filled by reamining individuals. While seniority is related to length of tenure, it bears no connection with staff allocation among subject areas. Reductions in personnel may thus seriously harm the effectiveness of total educational efforts by crippling some areas and eliminating others.[29] They also provide only partial solutions to questions of staff support. Because the most senior personnel are invariably those with the highest salaries, elimination of relatively large numbers of junior positions is required to maintain small numbers of those with higher rank.[30]

The Physical and Economic Dimension

Although the personal aspects of enrollment decline are of most immediate and vital concern, issues of space and money also bear considerable importance. Increasingly, it must be realized that architectural and financial formulas delineate the boundaries within which the personal phase of education must function.

Physical space is one of the most visible products of enrollment declines. The empty desks which are becoming such an important part of the educational vocabulary can be taken out of classrooms. Yet the space which they occupied remains. Enhanced program opportunities are an option but, in the words of one writer, what do you do when "You've done all the enrichment you can within existing fiscal limits, but still have empty classrooms?" [31]

In these circumstances, the logic of consolidating existing space becomes unavoidable. A corollary to this thesis is, of course, community use. At the same time, however, many areas, particularly those in suburban and semi-suburban regions, do not possess services large enough to occupy school buildings or portions of buildings.[32]

The disposition of space freed up by consolidation of school populations seems to be the aspect of declining enrollments most uniquely related to the needs of individual communities. While consolidating educational space itself contributes to increased efficiency in education, districts will also inevitably

work toward use of vacated areas in the best possible manner.

Fiscal concerns comprise another significant aspect of declining enrollments. Through their impact on school support, lower student populations influence educational programs, community attitudes, personnel situations, and space allocation. While it is true that greatest concern in this area usually focuses on people, rather than dollars, the tendency of support to be based on numbers of pupils effectively means that people are dollars.

Because public education is, in most areas, funded by both state and local monies, considerable attention has been devoted to state efforts at adjusting aid formulas to cope with enrollment declines. As has already been noted, 37 states have suffered enrollment declines. Of the remaining states with net increases, many have had to deal with reduced enrollments in individual districts.[33]

State governments have produced a variety of modifications of existing mechanisms for aid distribution. Arkansas, New York, New Jersey, Florida, Nevada, and others have offered aid guarantees to insure that each district will receive an amount of aid no less than that received in a given prior year. The New York State guarantee, for instance, promises districts 100% of the amount of aid which they collected in fiscal year 1974-75. Other states have approached the student count as a means of bolstering district aid. Arizona, Indiana, Montana and others have provided for optional use of prior year counts to enable

districts to maintain certain levels of aid. Colorado, North Dakota, and Ohio have opted for compromise approaches to student counts, utilizing multi-year averages of enrollments. Some states have directly attacked the problem of student loss, offering aid reimbursement options for certain percentages of declines.[34]

The impact of enrollment declines of state fiscal systems has been considerable. Efforts to cope with these changes have been widespread and innovative. Yet, the real magnitude of declines in enrollment falls on local school districts. States may attempt to ease the financial burden of decline, but the management process can only occur at the community level.

Statistics demonstrate that declining enrollments occur in school districts of all sizes. While large urban districts have been subjected to sometimes dramatic declines, suburban and rural areas have also been hard hit. While lower fiscal capacities can sometimes be accommodated in large districts, they often force the termination of programs in smaller systems whose funding patterns are more marginal.[35]

At the district level, the most important financial equation relates empty space to money. Declining enrollments produce excess capacity. If this excess capacity were beneficial to instructional programs, maintenance of it might be worth the additional cost. Yet, as has already been noted, extra space diffuses resources and thus reduces, rather than

enhances, educational experience.[36] The costs of empty space are staggering. In a typical school system, operating at 96% of capacity, the cost per pupil of heat, light, water, and telephone services for the school building has been estimated at $26.95. At 72% of capacity, this estimate increases to $46.80. At 52%, it reaches $63.61.[37] When both instructional and support costs are considered, the fact emerges that the use of space is closely related to productivity.

Other important fiscal aspects of declining enrollments relate losses in school populations to levels of expenditure. Because of the existence of fixed costs (rent, taxes, and other charges) which do not change as school populations vary, the financial burden of education is not directly proportional to the numbers of students. Sometimes, savings are consumed by salary increases and higher commodity prices before they can ever be realized.[38]

It is apparent that fiscal elements of enrollment drops do not exist in isolation. General economic conditions add to the impact of declining populations on educational budgets. Inflation cuts into the purchasing power of schools and curtails ability to procure both instructional supplies and support commodities. Popular resistance to tax increases effectively limits school revenue indirectly, through its influence on educational politics; and directly, through a rising number of budget defeats.[39]

The fiscal dimension of declining enrollments distills many of the other patterns in this trend. Levels of support effectively determine the limits within which programs must function. They also suggest future courses of action. This latter aspect of the data must especially concern educators, parents, and interested citizens. Only, it seems, through reasoned and skillful action will public education be preserved from the negative effects of declines in educational enrollments.

RESPONSE TO ENROLLMENT DECLINES

Lower school populations and the changes which have accompanied them have effectively replaced the educational environment which existed in the middle of the twentieth century. Just twenty years ago, America was in the midst of a period of unprecedented school growth. Overcrowded classrooms were widespread and districts often had two or three new buildings under construction at the same time. The whole thrust of action in education was upward and outward.[40]

Since then, the scenario has changed dramatically, and with this change has come the need for new patterns of action. It may be presumptuous to assume that the task of managing decline will be greater than that of managing expansion, but it seems safe to conclude that coping with the present situation will require considerable resourcefulness.

The major response to enrollment declines must focus

on relationships between people, and space as it is a problem of relationships among people. Space in school districts is not an inert commodity, it is intimately connected with popular feeling. School buildings are often centers of neighborhood sentiment.

Since the pattern of declining enrollments in many cases points to reallocation of space and closing of structures, the response to declines must come to grips with the human aspects of this process. At this point, the use of national patterns and statistics seems to lose much of its value. The reality of local school as the principal environment for action is inescapable.

Reorganization in One District

Unfortunately, most current case studies of response to enrollment declines bear a negative aura. They demonstrate how not to reorganize rather than how to reorganize, and overflow with laments concerning the difficulty of the process. The experience of the East Meadow, New York State District, in which two school buildings were first closed, then reopened when popular indignation reached a furor, has been documented ad infinitum.[42] The foregoing material, it seems, contains ample proof of the tasks which confront many districts. The present situation requires analysis of positive and successful efforts at managing change.

One system in which reorganization has met with notable success is the East Syracuse-Minoa district of Upstate New York.

Situated along the eastern periphery of the City of Syracuse, ES-M, like its neighbor systems, experienced the negative impacts of declining enrollments. While many area districts are still considering possible responses to lower student populations, however, East Syracuse-Minoa has already demonstrated achievement in dealing with this problem. The development of the ES-M effort clearly demonstrates how a reasoned planning approach can triumph over numerous obstacles.

Although East Syracuse-Minoa was selected for examination because of its record, rather than its nature, it shares similarities with other school systems. The district is neither wholly urban, nor wholly suburban. The community of East Syracuse, which forms its western pole, is comprised of urban neighborhoods adjoining the city of Syracuse, residential areas which possess a small town atmosphere, and developments resembling first circle suburbs. The villages of Minoa and Kirkville, which lie at the eastern end of the system, were originally rural communities that have become the settings for the construction of large numbers of one family homes and apartments. Between Minoa and East Syrause is Fremont, a group of pre-suburban homes which has been augmented by the development of small, suburban areas.

East Syracuse-Minoa is a collection of various neighborhoods. The principal components are East Syracuse and Minoa, the only two of the fifteen districts which, at consolidation, maintained secondary schools. East Syracuse itself consists of neighbor-

hoods such as Franklin Park, Park Hill, and Heman Street. (Map-Appendix A) In some cases, elementary schools have helped to maintain the identities of individual areas. The older Park Hill and Heman Street schools,completed in 1930 and 1940 respectively, have served such a function. In other neighborhoods, elementary schools have been superimposed on existing residential configurations. Thus, the construction of Fremont and Minoa schools (1964) took place long after the development of social patterns in those communities. The last elementary school to be constructed, Woodland (1968), was built near the center of the district on available land.[43]

Post elementary buildings are also distributed through the area covered by the school system. The former East Syracuse High School and a new structure, Pine Grove (1968), served as middle schools housing grades 6-8. The former Minoa High School (1912), accommodated grade 9, while a Central High School, erected during the mid-1960's embraced the upper three grade levels.[44]

Enrollment declines impacted East Syracuse-Minoa in much the same way that they touched public schools across the nation. Aggregate enrollment at East Syracuse-Minoa peaked at 6155 in 1971, while the national K-12 level reached its maximum the previous year. Data and projections indicate that ES-M and national enrollment totals will continue to decline, at least through 1982.[45]

Like enrollments at the national level, numbers of students

in ES-M elementary grades crested at the close of the 1960's and then slid into a period of decline. Of the District's five elementary schools only one, Minoa, peaked as late as 1973. This pattern resulted from the pace of home construction in the village. As might have been predicted, enrollment declines reached the system's middle schools slightly later. Maximum populations were attained in 1973 at Pine Grove and 1974 at East Syracuse Middle. The Ninth Grade Building recorded its largest enrollment in 1975.[46]

Population trends in secondary education at East Syracuse-Minoa also closely approximated that national pattern. If the pre-reorganization, 10-12 grade structure would have been maintained, high school enrollments would have crested in 1977, one year after the national peak.[47]

Awareness of the impact of declining school enrollments grew slowly in the ES-M area. The system's Board of Education and administration perceived the beginnings of the pattern at the elementary level during the early 1970's, but postponed immediate action in order to ascertain the dimensions of the trend. By 1975, however, the scope of the problem was clear. At that time, the dispersal of elementary students brought about by lower enrollments was already making effective group instruction difficult.

In order to deal with the situation, the Board and administration undertook a comprehensive effort to examine conditions and plan for the future. School officials were aware that

literature on the subject of reorganization suggested three alternative courses of action: rely exclusively on the expertise of the Board and administration and let them make the decision; hire a consultant to sell a plan to the community; or go to the public, propose options, and do a lot of listening.[48]

Realizing that no one had a monopoly on knowledge or skills in this area, the District chose a combined approach which emphasized the third option. It was first decided to conduct an extensive program of information-gathering. This was to be followed by consideration of possible plans of action by an independent task force and other groups. Inputs from all of these sources would eventually aid the East Syracuse-Minoa Board of Education in making a final decision.

Comprehensive information-gathering was crucial to the success of the planning process. The range of options available to the District could be no wider than the extent of data gained. The research program consisted of two components: one oriented toward instructional patterns, the other toward educational support. Both efforts were undertaken during the summer of 1977.

Consideration of instructional areas focused on practices being implemented within East Syracuse-Minoa schools, and on national trends. The progress of this program was greatly facilitated by the ample documentary resources possessed by the school system itself and by administrative personnel. Curricular research initially probed such space-related topics as school size, school organizational patterns, class size,

and ability grouping.[49] Later, such enrichment-related subjects as the organization of kindergarten classes, development of programs for gifted and talented children, and the elaboration of humanities curricula were also examined.[50]

Research relating to educational support concentrated both on facilities and financial support. Inspections were conducted to gather data on the dimensions, histories, and possible future uses of all school buildings. Opinions of qualified architects concerning all structures were procured and compared. The information-gathering program relating to space and facilities occurred in conjunction with the assembly of a district-wide master plan for energy conservation, services to the handicapped, and miscellaneous renovations.[51] By combining these two research efforts, the school system was able to avoid the expense and program disruption of multiple surveys, while producing a product which incorporated a wide range of needs and considerations.

Collection of data related to support also extended to financial information. Statistics concerning costs of components of the District's program were accumulated. National data regarding costs and savings realized by possible courses of action supplemented these figures.[52]

The basic information-gathering components of the planning program were essentially completed early in September 1977. Through a district mailing, the Board solicited nominations for an advisory committee. Labeled the Task Force on School District

Reorganization, this group was selected from a cross-sectional sampling of the East Syracuse-Minoa community. The Task Force was charged by the Board of Education with the mission of examining "present school district operation" and presenting a recommendation to the Board on January 10, 1978. Above all, the group was asked to assure an organizational pattern that would "maintain the current educational program and be as cost efficient as possible."[53]

The Board of Education's charge to the Task Force set the tone for subsequent deliberations, as well as for the whole of the reorganization effort. Priority was placed on maintenance of the breadth and quality of the existing instructional program. Cost efficiency was emphasized, yet only if this could be accomplished without compromising existing standards.

Task Force deliberations progressed through the autumn of 1977. Data was examined. Citizens and personnel were questioned. Discussions were conducted. The group soon realized the uniqueness of the reorganization issue. They came to agree with the opinions of educators across the nation who cautioned that enrollment decline was not simply one more problem which could be surmounted through minimal action or none at all.[54] It was agreed that major enrollment declines were impacting the school system's elementary grades and would continue to do so until at least 1982. It was also concluded that high school populations would not change appreciably

until 1981, after which they would begin an extended period of slow decline.[55]

The Task Force established that the most immediate problems occasioned by decline were difficulties in maintaining and improving instruction in the elementary grades. State standards were examined and compared with local results. The group determined that three or more sections of each grade level per building were necessary to make efficient group teaching workable. Grouping of students according to achievement levels was also hindered by existence of excessively small school populations.[56] The progress of East Syracuse-Minoa elementary students in reading was of special concern to the Task Force. Marked improvements in reading levels had been recorded by the District during the 1970's. Since reading was judged to be the most important academic skill for children, Task Force members proved reluctant to endanger the practices which made these gains possible. On the basis of available information, it was concluded that declining enrollments were necessitating the use of coping strategies by elementary teachers. Since these approaches were producing reduced progress toward educational goals, continued maintenance of standards would require additional action. Alternative moves suggested by the Task Force included adoption of a less promising reading program, hiring of additional staff, and combining of school populations to increase flexibility for each child.[57]

The Task Force gave consideration to national authorities, who recommended the use of enrichment programs to expand educational experiences while also occupying excess space. Such possibilities seemed particularly attractive since they contributed to the quality of instruction by making more efficient use of existing facilities.[58]

Through examination of programs already in existence at East Syracuse-Minoa, however, the Task Force concluded that such an option was not available to the District. In point of fact, the school system had apparently implemented its own form of 'enrichment reorganization' prior to 1977. Curriculum resource facilities had already been established. A former elementary school had been remodeled to house additional curriculum resource units, as well as a centralized duplicating center. Another elementary school had been renovated to house the Board of Education meeting rooms, administrative and business offices, and central records. Still another small school had been leased to the county Board of Cooperative Educational Services for use in vocational education. The last remaining former school building, located at the far western end of the district, was in the process of sale to a local fire department.[59] Opportunities for federal and state educational grants might have provided funds and opportunities for development of space, yet, the District already operated grant programs in reading and mathematics and seemed reluctant to overextend these efforts through the assumption of additional burdens. In

many ways, ES-M was a classic example of a system which had already carried enrichment to its maximum extent.

While the focus of Task Force attention was fixed on curriculum and instruction, important consideration was also given to the impact of declining enrollments on the community, school personnel, space, and fiscal patterns. Community ties to school buildings were examined. It was noted that educational structures often formed foci of neighborhood sentiment and activity. It was also concluded, however, that the movement of almost all district children to school buildings transformed former neighborhood schools into bussing schools. Thus, Park Hill Elementary School actually served more children from neighboring developments than children from surrounding older homes. Fremont and Minoa Elementary Schools were constructed long after patterns of community sentiment and social interaction came into being.[60] Again mindful of national developments, the Task Force realized that some popular outcry would occur if buildings should be vacated. In many cases, it was assumed that a major popular consideration in school closings would be that the building be as far as possible from the individual's home.[61]

Another important personal consideration which occupied the attention of the Task Force was the allocation of staff. Examination of data and consultation with personnel revealed that most of any possible employee displacement would be absorbed by retirement and attrition. Some loss of instructional and

non-instructional positions would occur, however. It was judged that if existing instructional levels were to be maintained, personnel would inevitably be affected.[62]

Space and financial considerations were also reviewed by the Task Force. Possible grade level arrangements which would consolidate existing grade levels and use reduced amounts of space were considered and modified. Costs of possible approaches were assembled and analyzed.[63]

During its deliberations, the Task Force invited public comment. Reaction to the group's activities developed early. Initial comments included criticism of the need for the existence of another public body.[64] A report containing enrollment trends and projections, mailed to residents during November, produced shock in many quarters. The public was aroused by the situation and became extremely interested in what the Board of Education would do to meet the conditions.[65]

A meeting was held early in January 1978 to present Task Force recommendations and consider public opinion. At that time, the citizens' group suggested a phased program of reorganization. It advised that, beginning in the 1979-80 school year, Heman Street and Fremont Elementary Schools be closed and their pupils transferred to Park Hill and Woodland schools respectively. Space required for this move would be created through the transfer of a number of Woodland students to unoccupied space at Minoa Elementary. The plan also included provision for a 1979 closing of the Ninth Grade Building; a transfer of all

pupils in grades 6-8 to Pine Grove Middle School; and the movement of grade 9 to the vacated East Syracuse Middle School. Grade 9 would be housed in East Syracuse unitl the Central High School could be modified to receive it.[66]

In order to bring relief to elementary school curricula, the Task Force recommended the hiring of additional staff to facilitate appropriate grouping in reading and mathematics. Evaluation of the length of the K-8 school day with an eye toward better utilization of time was also suggested.[67]

A minority report attached to the Task Force Recommendations, recommended an alternative scheme of reorganization. This approach included the closing of Woodland Elementary School, because it was "not a community school", and the transfer of Woodland's pupils to Fremont, Park Hill, and Woodland Schools. Impetus for the minority report originated with Fremont Elementary School parents.[68]

The East Syracuse-Minoa Board of Education received the recommendations of the Task Force as well as data concerning alternatives which had been considered. A wide range of public comments concerning approaches to reorganization were obtained. The Board resolved to consider the work which had been accomplished and proceed toward a decision concerning required action. The Board immediately implemented part of the Task Force program, hiring additional staff for elementary reading and mathematics programs, and initiating studies concerning the length of the school day and use of existing time in elementary schools.[69]

After receiving the Task Force report, district officials embarked on a wide ranging examination of the plan recommended by the group, as well as a number of alternatives. As an aid to this effort, school administrators accumulated and assembled cost data on each of the approaches to reorganization. Financial information was organized so that cost profiles for new configurations which the Board might devise could be rapidly assembled. Administrative efforts,in this regard, significantly contributed to the efficiency of the planning process by enabling decision-makers to compare as well as develop structures within short time periods.

As the ES-M Board itself pursued the response to enrollment declines during 1978, another fact of reorganization was brought home; that the process does not take place in a vacuum. The Board and Administration had anticipated a lengthy and detailed consideration of the Task Force Report, followed by further research concerning a narrowed range of alternatives and selection of a final course of action. Yet, events outside the District combined with local sentiment to modify and interrupt the planning process.

The movement which culminated in the passage of California's Proposition 13 merged with a rising pattern of school budget defeats in 1978 to produce two defeats of East Syracuse-Minoa budget referenda within June 1978 alone. Neighboring districts also felt the impact of taxpayer resentment. On one night alone, budgets of three of the area's largest district's were turned down.

The shock waves from Proposition 13 had a double effect on the reorganization process at East Syracuse-Minoa. The excess staff and Board time required for the production of additional budgets and budget data detracted from planning efforts. The demands of the public for tax relief also inspired greater attention to cost savings and general efficiency within the context of reorganization. In a sense, the postponement of District reorganization created by budget defeats in the East Syracuse-Minoa District was ironic. On one hand, the public demanded relief from educational expenditures. On the other, however, the need to implement short range budgets stood in the way of long term reform.

East Syracuse-Minoa's 1978-79 operating budget was finally passed late in August 1978, not long before the start of fall classes. Budgets of some neighboring districts were never approved. With this work completed, school officials returned to the process of reorganization.

In order to facilitate the planning process, the Board of Education scheduled a series of working sessions exclusively for development of a definitive course of action. Extending through the autumn of 1978, these gatherings formed the environment within which the ultimate plan would coalesce.

As part of this process, the Board and administration provided for the involvement of District personnel within the reorganization effort. The gathering included presentations by administrators and forums for small group discussion. The

Superintendent opened the meeting with a review of the national impact of declining enrollments. Staff members followed with presentations concerning particular phases of the impact of the population drops.[70]

Small group discussions among personnel produced an extremely wide range of comments. As might have been predicted, many questions concerned specific aspects of classroom procedure. Analysis of responses gained made it clear, however, that staff were well aware of the reasons for and the difficulties of reorganization. Teachers agreed that the principal consideration in reorganization should be maintenance of the existing instructional program. A number of comments suggested a plan which would embody the closing of the Ninth Grade Building and the grouping of middle school students at Pine Grove.[71]

The results of the Superintendent's workshop, as well as the Task Force recommendations and other information which had been collected, were used by the East Syracuse-Minoa Board of Education to define further possible approaches to reorganization. In order to facilitate public contact with the decision-making process, some Board meetings were scheduled at individual schools throughout the District.[72]

Through extended hours of research and considerations, school officials narrowed the options for reorganization. Above all, the issue of the elementary schools remained. During October 1978, the Board concluded that declining elementary

enrollments necessitated the implementation of one of three approaches.

The first alternative would have closed two elementary schools. Under its provisions, Park Hill students would have been transferred to Heman Street School and Fremont Elementary students assigned to Woodland Elementary School. Both the Administration Building and the Resource Center would also have been closed and their operations moved to the vacated Fremont building.

The second alternative approach would have established elementary school 'partnerships' by combining grade levels. It provided that Heman Street and Woodland Schools would house only grades K-3 while Park Hill and Fremont include grades 4-6. At the same time it would have expanded Minoa Elementary to embrace levels K-6. East Syracuse Middle School and the Ninth Grade Building would have been closed. Pine Grove Middle School would have housed grades 7-9.

The third approach embodied various concepts. It contained the second alternative's provision for closing both East Syracuse Middle School and the Ninth Grade Building and the assignment of all students in grades 7-9 to Pine Grove. It also provided for closing Park Hill Elementary School, but delayed this move until the 1981-82 school year, assuming the continuation of existing enrollment patterns. In order to facilitate grouping for instruction at the District's elementary schools, this approach would have assigned all K-5 students at

Woodland Elementary School to the other four elementary buildings. All of the system's grade 6 students would then have been assigned to Woodland. [73]

The formulation of the three alternative plans constituted an important milestone in the reorganization process. Each approach embodied a distinctive organizational philosophy: the first would have closed elementary schools, while the second focused on the development of elementary level partnerships, and the third embodied a combination of aspects. Financial data revealed that savings in excess of $300,000 could be realized through each move.

In November 1978, discussions in the school system ultimately focused on the second alternative's philosophy of partnership arrangements. The Board agreed that the establishment of schools including grades K-3 and 4-6 would preserve existing methods of elementary instruction and also result in considerable financial savings. It also judged that the grouping of all students in grades 7-9 at Pine Grove Middle School would enhance the provision of quality, efficient instruction to pupils at the intermediate levels. Upon further consideration of the second option, the Board concluded that the partnership arrangement in the eastern part of the District should be implemented with Heman Street School and the former East Syracuse Middle School, rather than with Heman Street and Park Hill. The gymnasium at Park Hill was known to be in need of renovations costing $100,000, while classroom, library, and

athletic facilities at East Syracuse Middle were known to be of generally superior quality.[74]

The plan ultimately formulated by the Board during November 1978 included the partnership arrangements, the closing of the Ninth Grade Building and Park Hill Elementary School, and the establishment of Minoa Elementary as a K-6 facility. With the exception of the Central High School, the new structure affected every building in the District. The formula had been the product of countless revisions and reexaminations. The final change, which involved the closing of Park Hill Elementary rather than East Syracuse Middle School building, resulted from the Board's own determination to make the most of existing resources.

Of major importance was the plan's flexibility to accommodate enrollment increases. Mindful of literature which indicated that the costs of reopening a school after closing were considerable, the Board and administration sought to avoid any long term hidden expenses of reorganization. By raising building enrollments moderately, the District corrected instructional difficulties at the elementary level without risking the possibility of repeating the entire process in reverse when elementary student populations would begin to rise again.

The formula which the Board and administration finally arrived at contained numerous advantages. Yet none of these seemed to guarantee public approval of the effort. Both Board members and administrators were cognizant of the experience

of other areas, in which practical considerations had been cast aside, while board officials were defeated in elections and administrators discharged by citizens emotionally opposed to closing schools on any ground. The East Syracuse-Minoa proposal targeted two buildings for closing; while adjusting grade level arrangements at all but one of its schools. A neighboring district had unsuccessfully labored for several years to close only one structure.[75]

A public Board meeting was scheduled in mid-December to consider adoption of the reorganization program. Concerted efforts were made to secure maximum participation in the process. Notices were dispatched and newspapers contacted to insure that even those who had not demonstrated an interest in previous elements of the process would know that a final decision was near.

For two painstaking hours on December 5, 1978, the East Syracuse-Minoa School Board scrupulously considered the product of over 18 months of preparation for reorganization. Over one hundred members of the general public attended the meeting. Board members and district administrators answered questions, rebutted criticisms and defended the plan. Points of support and criticism, some reasoned - some not, proceeded from the floor. In their simplicity, many of the comments offered reflected the weight of effort and responsibility that was coming to bear. A resident argued "You're destroying the elementary schools,... you're destroying everything we've

worked for". Board President Marilyn Peet affirmed, "We don't feel ... that we are doing anything that will be harmful to the educational process". Taxpayers questioned "Are we going to see a direct (monetary) result of reorganization?" Superintendent Fritz Hess summarized, "There is no ideal plan."[76]

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Board member who had dissented throughout the reorganization discussions approached the microphone and urged all present to support the effort. He voiced what seemed to be the consensus of the group, that the plan was the best possible. A local newspaper summarized what followed, "The Board members closed their discussion and approved the plan - and they left their audience applauding."[77]

The Board's unanimous approval of the reorganization plan paved the way for implementation of the program. The timing of the decision was particularly advantageous. Coming in December 1978, it allowed ample time for staffing and facility adjustments necessary to carry out the move. It also permitted the District's budgeting process, which begins annually during December and January, to incorporate the approved changes.[78]

The aftermath of the Board's vote, although it had no effect on the decision, was also an important aspect of the reorganization process. Many school officials had speculated that, despite the ceaseless efforts to apprise the public of events concerning reorganization, negative reaction might be

delayed until after word of the move appeared in local newspapers. Opposition to school closings which had occurred in East Syracuse-Minoa, as well as neighboring districts, convinced administrators that some type of negative feedback was inevitable.

A special newsletter, describing the reorganization plan, was mailed to all district residents. When public reaction to the Board's move did appear, however, it was laudatory, rather than negative in content. An open letter written by parents in a nearby district praised the East Syracuse-Minoa Board for squarely facing the issues and taking needed action.[79] District officials were widely congratulated for the wisdom and courage they exhibited. Not one negative letter appeared in local newspapers. The District's offices received no critical calls. As school officials moved toward implementing the mechanics of reorganization, an awareness of the need for the process seemed to have developed.

Analysis of a Success

East Syracuse-Minoa Central Schools' response to declining enrollments was more than a stop gap measure. It was a stunning success for positive planning. The developments at the Board meeting on December 5, 1978 summarized the progress of the effort. The presentation of the proposed plan; the airing of objections; Dr. Hess's remark "There is no ideal plan", the vote, and the applause, all captured the essence of a triumph.

Yet, to see the whole of reorganization in a single night

is to be misled. Reorganization at East Syracuse-Minoa involved a planning process, a complicated effort which spanned over 18 months. Each step was carefully approached and surmounted. In some cases, moves already taken were reconsidered and reversed. Some elements of the plans developed by the 1977-78 Task Force were dropped while others survived either as originally presented or in some modified form. Even the October 1978 proposals were altered prior to acceptance on the December 5th meeting. Although these three plans were finalized less than two months before the final vote, not one of them was wholly adopted.

From a general standpoint, the East Syracuse-Minoa experience supports the use of moderate amounts of planning. The District's Board Members and administrators were cognizant of the need for planning. Some of the information-gathering techniques they adopted were borrowed from ones documented in available literature.[80] At the same time, however, school system members determined that planning could be overdone to the point where it would obscure and delay action. Accordingly, they kept their approach as simple as possible and stayed away from methods which proposed extended three and four year techniques.[81] In so doing, they attained speed without sacrificing thoroughness. Despite a frustrating summer of budget defeats, they accomplished reorganization in approximately 18 months.

Much of the rapidity of the East Syracuse-Minoa experience

was made possible by the directness and openness of the approach selected. From the start of the process the importance of two priorities, educational quality and cost efficiency, was made clear. Emphasis on these objectives was a continual source of direction to the effort. The present need for instructional grouping in the elementary schools and the prospect of it in the middle school grades suggested possible configurations of reorganization. Financial considerations supported some of these approaches and became the deciding factor in the closing of an elementary school.

The process of reorganization was kept as open as possible. The several revisions which marked the effort reflect the fact openness of procedure was accompanied by openness of thought. The sifting of information and alternatives became an extended process, but openness and patience combined to produce a worthwhile result.

Perhaps most significantly, East Syracuse-Minoa officials never lost touch with the reality of their situation. They were aware that similar approaches to reorganization had been discussed and rediscussed in the literature. Yet they also knew what William F. Keough so aptly summarized when he wrote that "viewing these decline management needs in the late-evening quiet of the Superintendent's office while "taking stock" is easy; acting upon them in the midst of the relentlessly-demanding school day is difficult."[81]

Reorganization at East Syracuse-Minoa may yet contain additional chapters. Although the revised plan retains some excess capacity for enrollment reexpansion, changed conditions could modify the setup. From the present standpoint, however, the new organization is an impressive achievement. It represents a response to declining enrollments which itself should prove responsive to new developments.

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